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The BITLESS BRIDLE™
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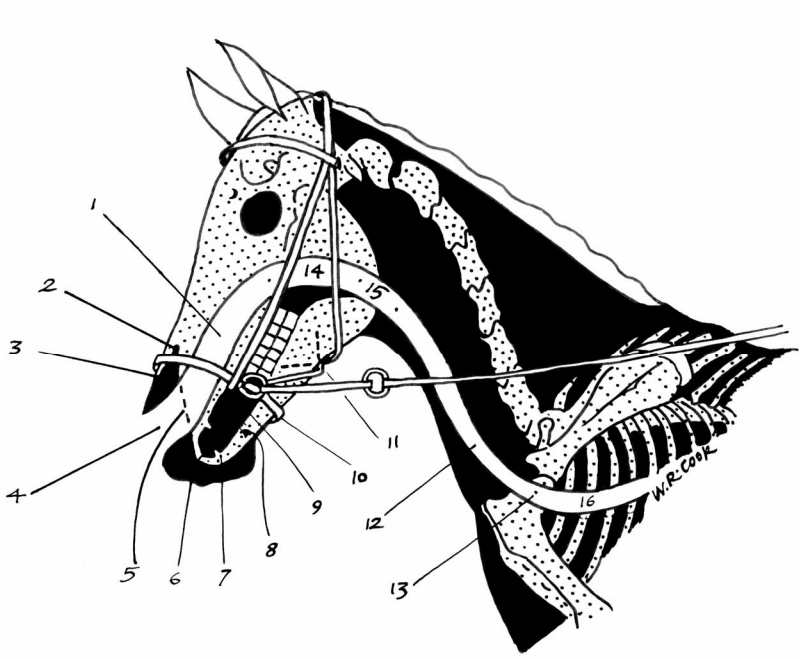
PROBLEM SOLVING

From time to time but infrequently, riders report that the bridle does not seem to work for their particular horse. Problems include inability to steer, inability to stop, a horse that starts headshaking that has never shaken before, or a horse that simply fusses when the bridle is placed on its head. There can be several explanations for these problems but by far the most common is that the bridle has not been fitted correctly. There are a number of other explanations and, in any one instance, one or more of the following may apply.
Please check the list below to overcome any disappointment with the bridle:

The noseband is not low enough:

The correct level for the noseband of The Bitless Bridle is lower than the level of the noseband of a bitted bridle. This correct lower level can be used without fear of obstructing the nostrils. If the noseband is placed too high, riders will find that they lose some signal sensitivity and also leverage. The result is that they will find themselves doing too much shoulder work to communicate and their horse may feel heavy on the forehand. As stated in the user's manual, in an average-sized horse, the bottom edge of the noseband should be one-and-a-half to two inches above the corner of your horse's mouth. Individual horses may show a preference for having the noseband half an inch or more higher than this, so it is sometimes necessary to find the sweet spot by trial and error.

To overcome the problem of using a measurement (which may or not apply, depending on the actual size of the horse in question), there is another test that can be used to double check that you have the noseband correctly placed. This test is based on anatomy and can be applied to every horse, regardless of size, from miniature to draft. To understand the anatomy, refer to number 2 on the diagram below.



The spotted areas on the diagram represents bone, the black areas represent soft tissue. On the side of the head, at the level of where the noseband fits, you can feel the bone shapes and identify the edges of that inverted 'V'-shaped notch in dense black, which is where the soft tissues of the false nostril lie. If the noseband is fitted at the correct level, you should be able to just identify, with the tip of your forefinger, the soft area at the top of the notch (#2 on the diagram).

If you would like to learn more about the form and function of the horse's head that are interfered with by the bit, visit the website (www.bitlessbridle.com) and click on 'Articles.' Now select the article entitled, "Compatibility of the Crossover Bitless Bridle."

The noseband is too low:

This is generally the explanation for a horse that begins to shake its head that has not previously been a head tosser. Another explanation is sharp cheek teeth (see item below). . If the noseband is so low that it interferes with your horse's breathing, he/she may even rear.

The noseband and chinstrap are not fitted snugly:

You should be able to fit one flat finger between the chinstrap and the horse's jaw bone. If the noseband moves vigorously up the horse's face when pressure is applied via the reins, then it is too loose. A good indication that this is occurring will be significant bowing of the cheek pieces (a *slight* bowing of the cheek pieces is normal). The excess movement may also result in hair loss where the noseband rubs. Some horses might raise their heads if the noseband is slipping and some might dive their heads toward the ground.

Check too that the buckle of the chinstrap (on the nylon and beta version) is not seesawing on the bottom edge of the jawbone and causing discomfort. (A Cashel 'cushion' can be used for added comfort.)

One or both of the crossover straps are trapped under the chinstrap:

The solution to this problem is self-evident but until it is corrected there will be a significant lack of communication.

The browband may be too small and your horse is experiencing pain at the base of the ear:

Check that the browband fits comfortably. If it is too tight on your particular horse, a larger size browband can be sent in exchange for the smaller one.

Your horse may have sharp edges to one or more cheek teeth in the upper jaw:

Because the chinstrap of the Bitless Bridle is fitted more snugly than a bitted bridle, it may be pressing the horse's cheeks against sharp enamel edges and causing pain. Such a horse may start to shake its head or even rear that had not previously shown either of these traits. The problem will disappear after the teeth have been floated.

Your horse may be merely reacting to the unfamiliar feel of this new bridle:

If you purchased a leather bridle, new leather is stiff and only softens up and becomes comfortable, like an old shoe, after it has been oiled and worked in. Passage of time will cure the leather stiffness problem.

An early exhibition of high spirits on the part of a horse when first introduced to the Bitless Bridle:

This *joie de vivre* at apparently being 'free at last' is seen occasionally but is not something that recurs after the first trial. Even at the first trial, such horses generally remain under control and their feeling of freedom is only the joy of freedom from pain rather than the actual freedom to do whatever they please.

You may be using too much 'Contact':

Understandably, some riders may be nervous or anxious about riding their horse the first time without a bit and, unknowingly, use too much contact. Contact is something that is taught widely – the need to maintain 'contact' with the horse's mouth. However, with the Bitless Bridle the issue of contact is not as important and often 'less is more' – i.e., less contact = more communication. If you are having problems with the BB it can help to ride with less contact than you have previously become accustomed to using.

A few riders have stated that they can no longer "get their horse into a frame":

The phrase itself - 'getting a horse into a frame' - provides the clue to this problem. True collection depends on years of proper training of both horse and rider. Collection should be thought of as another word for balance. Unless both horse and rider are fit, the horse cannot achieve true collection. Both horse and rider have to be fit enough to maintain their own balance. If even one member of the partnership is not fit enough, the 'dance' will not be successful. An independent seat is, for example, an essential component of a rider's balance. Rider balance should also be dependent on 'seat and legs' rather than 'hands.' If a rider has been using rein pressure on a bitted bridle to achieve a semblance of what they think of as collection, they will initially be disappointed with the Bitless Bridle and may even decide that 'it doesn't work.' Bit-induced poll flexion, however, is not the same as true collection ... it is **false** collection. With patience and proper training, the Bitless Bridle will provide all the collection that a rider desires. Remember too that the horse has to be given the necessary training to develop the muscular strength that allows him to accommodate to the weight of a rider. This process cannot and should not be hurried. It takes months or even years rather than days.

'My horse runs away with me and I cannot stop him':

True bolting is extremely rare with the Bitless Bridle. A rider is far less likely to be run away with if they use the Bitless Bridle than if they use a bitted bridle. Horses run away in fear (the spook reaction) or the hope of escaping from pain. The most common source of pain is the bit, though pain in the back or feet can also be a trigger for bolting. However, some riders mistake acceptable eagerness on the part of a horse with true bolting. Horses are herd animals. When in company, many a horse will exhibit a dislike of being left behind and will be eager to catch up with a horse in front. This is not the same as bolting and an absence of brakes.

The spook reaction can never be entirely eliminated, as it is hard-wired into the evolution of a horse's behavior. But the difference between the after-effect of a spook in a bitted bridle and a spook in The Bitless Bridle is significant. A bitted horse that spooks receives an immediate jolt in the mouth. It is the acute pain of this that triggers a tendency to bolt in the first instance and the continued pain created by a frantic rider that perpetuates the bolt. The horse that spooks when being ridden in The Bitless Bridle may receive a jog of its head as the rider regains her balance but this does not hurt. The result is that the bitless horse recovers far more quickly from the initial fright. He may run for a short distance but either stops on his own accord or is soon stopped by the rider. This is a spook, not a true bolt.

If a horse should 'bolt' in the BB, use the same method to stop him as you would with a bitted bridle (often referred to as the 'one rein stop'). Pull one rein in and turn your horse in a tight circle. If the terrain does not permit circling, see-saw the reins with quick, vigorous and repetitive left/right pressure. Unlike when this is done with a bitted bridle, you cannot hurt your horse but it will get his attention.

"In the Bitless Bridle I cannot prevent my horse from grazing at exercise":

Inability to prevent a horse from dropping its head at exercise is really something that needs to

be tackled with further training. Take a look at Dr. Jessica Jahiel's website (www.horse-sense.org) and do a search in the invaluable archives of her Newsletter for advice on this problem. A shortcut approach is to use a grazing rein (sidecheck).

A misunderstanding about the question of 'Release':

Some riders (especially those who have never used the Bitless Bridle) seem to think that the BB does not provide release, perhaps because they see no movement in the crossover straps at the level of the 'O' ring on the noseband. But a lack of movement (there is little in the first place ... the "O" ring does not function like a pulley system) does not mean that there is no release of pressure. This is very easy to test. Simply stand by your horse's head and place the fingers of your left hand under the crossover strap as it passes up the side of the cheek on the left side of your horse. Now, with your right hand, apply tension and release to the reins. You will find that the bridle produces a convincing squeeze and release. The same 'release' can be detected at the poll, across the nose, and under the chin. For further comment on this common misunderstanding, Go to the website www.bitlessbridle.com, click on 'Product Information' and select 'Frequently Asked Questions' – scroll down to #23.

In fact, though release is imperative with the bitted bridle, *because pain has been caused*, there is not the same need to be concerned about release with the Bitless Bridle as no pain was caused in the first instance. Nevertheless, be assured that 'release' **does** occur.

Your horse may be reacting to pain or discomfort somewhere else in the body:

Having eliminated discomfort in the mouth by removing the bit, your horse may still be feeling discomfort elsewhere which was previously masked by the overriding pain in the mouth. The two most common sites are back and feet. You can check if the back or saddle is the problem (even though you may have recently had your horse's back and/or saddle checked) by riding bareback or lungeing without a saddle.

If you suspect that your horse's feet may be causing him some discomfort and he is shod, consider the many benefits of letting him go barefoot. There are many barefoot websites which you can use as a basis for research into barefoot trimming. i.e.:
www.barefoothorse.com, www.barefoottrim.com, www.strasserhoofcare.com, www.thehorseshoof.com

Removal of metal from the horse's feet can be as beneficial as its removal from the mouth. A so-called 'pasture-trim', as carried out by a farrier, although a step in the right direction is not the complete answer. Although some horses will successfully negotiate hard ground with a pasture trim, most horses will benefit from the attentions of a qualified 'barefoot trimmer' to enable them to be ridden barefoot on all surfaces.

Use of the Bitless Bridle should not be considered as a substitute for training:

Although many horses do adapt instantly, or almost instantly, sometimes you do see a few new resistances (or the re-emergence of "old" ones that you thought you had cured when bitted), such as head tossing or rushing. These are typically seen on the first ride only, for obvious reasons. But sometimes they emerge quite suddenly on about the 2nd or 3rd ride, and take a few rides after that to sort out. The explanation for such a development may be that

the rider is at this point more confident about the new head gear, and starts to ask for a little more. Then it becomes a matter of fine-tuning and adjustment for the next few rides.

A few people have reported that their horse was exceptionally ‘light’ in the bit but for the first few rides in the Bitless Bridle felt heavier and on the forehand. Such a horse was probably always on the forehand, but "sucked back" from the bit to avoid pain. Other horses lean on a bit to avoid pain (they may also put their tongue over the bit as part of this pain avoidance) and have trouble balancing for a while after it is removed - and no wonder, because they were never properly balanced before. But these things all go away pretty quickly in the BB with a little regular schooling and/or bodywork. And the beauty is that while this is being achieved, the horse is more comfortable and, most importantly, has the *opportunity* to become balanced, in time, in the way he should be under saddle. Remember too that the horse has to be given the necessary training to develop the muscular strength that allows him to accommodate to the weight of a rider. This process cannot and should not be hurried. It takes months or even years rather than days.

Sometimes a user will report that, after the first few rides, their horse is resistant to turning left or right. Most horses, like humans, have their ‘good sides’ and are better in one direction than another but if this doesn’t go away within half a dozen rides or so, look for another explanation. There mat be a problem that, until now, has been masked by the pain of the bit. A horse that is stiff to turn in the BB may need some bodywork or may be reacting to a stiff or crooked rider. Maybe the horse seemed easier to turn in the bit because his discomfort in the mouth outweighed everything else.